

CuMMA PAPERS #4

CuMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

OF DISTANCES
WITHIN THE
ARCHIVE'S
NERVOUS SYSTEM
AN INTERVIEW
WITH DOREEN
MENDE
BY JULIA NYMAN
& SALVATORE
ELEFANTE

The archive seems to be the centre of attention for several practices connected with the cultural management. Why is there such cultural gold rush? Where is the El Dorado? Maybe it is in the unsaid? Or maybe it is in the interstices of what has been said? Or maybe it has nothing to do with the said or unsaid, therefore it is outside of the language and its logic?

When we talk about an archive, we enter a dim space where suggestions, presences and absences, the desire to see and the desire to hide, cries and silences combine in a net of functional, but unstable relations. This makes it very difficult to establish what the panoramic viewpoint is, or where the best vantage points are.

Nevertheless we can assert, that irrespective of nature of these relations, the primary motive of the archive is memory. And if there were a grain of truth in what the historian Le Goff said, "To make themselves the master of memory and forgetfulness is one of the great preoccupations of the classes, groups

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and individuals that have dominated and continue to dominate historical society”, then it is possible to get a glimpse of the importance of this thing, or being, that the archive is.

The lines that will follow are an interview with Doreen Mende on the occasion of a workshop and a lecture on the topic of the archive she held in Helsinki in September 2012.

Doreen Mende is a researcher of the think-tank PhD-program Curatorial/Knowledge of the Department Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths College London. She is based in Berlin.

She worked on the research project and exhibition *Double Bound Economies* together with the artist Armin Linke and the photography historian Estelle Blaschke. It was during this project she developed her relationship to the archive. She brought the archive they worked with for *Double Bound Economies* to Helsinki, and used it for the workshop.

How can we exhibit an archive, and why is it important to exhibit archives?

In order to take up your first point, let me enter through another aspect: What do we have in mind when we talk about an ‘archive’? Filled boxes in shelves? A series of thick books containing thousand of photographs (which I brought with me to Helsinki)? ‘Original’ material? An ordering system that helps us to find what we try to search for? – Or a vast amount of unorganized, sometimes even vanished material? A politics of memory, that means, what does the archive make us forgetting? What happens to those voices in the archive that (will) remain unrecorded? How do we relate to time and economics, when we revisit, displace, favour or condemn images from an archive today in the domain of art? It seems to me important to ask these question even before we begin to think, how to exhibit an archive.

During our research project and exhibition 'Double Bound Economies,' which I developed together with the artist Armin Linke and the photography historian Estelle Blaschke over a period of two years, my understanding of an archive profoundly changed. Estelle brought into the discussion the notion of 'fragility of the archive.' I would describe it with the necessity to insist to call the archive an archival body. That means, an archive operates through its own nervous system and metabolism; it sometimes clearly tells you what to do and also what to refrain and resist. The archival body does not call for quantity but asks about its psycho-affective consequences. In reverse, it means, that only a single image could even be an archival body.

Having said this, there is an enormous power/empowerment that arrives from the archival body beyond any ordering system and the control of 'gate-keepers'. It does not stand in 'the law of what can be said' as Foucault defines the archive. It might not even care about the law.

Importantly, my approach to the archive is shaped by the fact that we worked with the semi-public photo archive of an East German freelance-photographer (not employed by any state institution). It was neither part of an institution nor a state organization, but it was located in somebody's private home until recently (my parents' house). Many archives, which are able to tell us something about struggles against the state and/or the schizophrenia in certain political systems, are grounded in such a private/public double-bind. Hence, the East German photo archive differs from the condition through which Foucault developed his archive theory, in which he looks

at the archive through the frame of power, surveillance and prison. (Alain Renais' film 'Toute la memoire du monde', 1956, proposes a similar explanation with cinematic means). It is not that these instances of control have ceased necessarily, but as more I engaged with the archival excess as more it released a certain 'poetic virus' (Suely Rolnik). It needs a time of incubation in order to find ways to articulate the irrationalities, fevers and phantasms. (You might also be aware of the work by Derrida, who speaks of a 'fever') Rolnik reminds us that the archive consists of a macro-political dimension and a micro-political potency. The macro-political departs from structural faculties (concrete material, ordering systems). The micro-political might lack any categorical systematization and an established language; it places the pre-linguistic face of the body in the middle of the concern. The micro-political might even request to produce a kind of 'new' language which first needs to be learned. This is a hard thing to do. I have been interested in this 'virus', which rumbles and slumbers. If the 'virus' runs through the archival body, nothing will remain as it was.

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Coming back to your question, in fact two questions: It is impossible 'to exhibit' an archive because it is an infected body, which changes, hides, tricks and affects us. If we wanted to take up on it, it has also consequences in relation to that which you called 'to exhibit.' The space of exhibiting can try to provide conditions in which the archival body allows the virus to break out, however, it won't deliver ready-made-stories-to-go on public display. It locates us in an environment where we need to learn, maybe through a series of acts of exposure introducing the forces of time and of the body in the space of exhibiting, how to relate to the 'virus.' Your second question: It is politically necessary. Which space is needed so that everyone, who wants to make use of his/her struggles and desires, has access to the archival body?

"If 'representation' dissolves in a totalitarian claim of the 'real,' we give up our means to distance ourselves from ourselves."

Talking about the archive means to talk about its access. Without access there is no archive, at least in its vivid form. How does the archive's accessibility change, in relation to the change of time?

I think, I have touched this question in my reflections above already. Let me just make a note on your statement 'without access there is no archive.' It is a given and obvious that everyone should have access to archive material. This is out of question. The space of art may take up a crucial role in this process, because it also is a question of economics: to digitalize an archive for open usage, i.e. to make it accessible for the general public, depends on budget for technology, man power, infrastructure, labour expenses. An art project can be a good excuse to get money. However, I am somehow doubtful about the defining power by the degree of access over its existence. Shall we leave the existence of the archive in the hands of structural and logistical faculties? This is the reason why I prefer to speak of the 'archival body' since it allows to suspend for a moment the tiring struggle for access and also a certain danger of competition (in the field of art) in terms of who is able to 'safe' which archive (and to make an 'exhibition' with it). However, I absolutely agree with you, that we need access to archives; and maybe we need then to re-think 'access'.

If we think about representation in its political form, to talk on behalf of someone, exposing or representing an archive involves the assumption that one has such power of representation. Does this assumption bring some kind of duty with it?

This is a tricky question. It could be obviously approached by an ethical concern, which reminds us on the importance of accountability for 'the other' in relation to the 'self'. Looked from a curatorial reflection, Okwui Enwezor speaks about *vérité* in the realm of exhibiting. He relates it to a complementary connection between ethics and aesthetics; it is borrowed from cinema *vérité*, a moment in French cinema after WWII, particularly emerging from ethnographical problems: What are the structural conditions that produce a visual grammar for the translation of the gaze? And how do they categorize the one who is exposed through the distribution of the image in public? You might be aware of the stereotyping brutality of race and gender through visual representation, to which the mechanisms of the 'exhibition' contribute(d) strongly. Therefore your question is very important.

In relation to our project 'Double Bound Economies,' we've tried to avoid to come up with a theory of a 'socialist aesthetics' in photographic practice. But also the archival body told us to do so: The excess of images makes it impossible to categorize that which is in the archive. It became impossible to say how a worker in the people-owned factory, a ministerial international delegate, or a 'socialist' woman look like.

Instead, questions like Which angle has the camera? How is the image cropped? Which images are before and after the one selected? What is the unspoken contract between the photographed and the photographer? How do we select single images from the vast amount after all? Why are mainly women on the images in the factories? What does the delegation from Angola negotiate under the framed portrait of Honecker in a *separée*?

Importantly, let me move on in another direction, which could be seen as a strategic concern: The issue of representation. I am thrilled by the idea to discuss the space of exhibiting from a real-political perspective. Can we think of a different

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type of parliament (in form of the space of exposure) than what we see everyday in news coverage of political speeches and parliamentary performances? What if we considered the space of exposure as a parliament of different kind? This leads me to another aspect: 'Double Bound Economies' is a group project. This is very important. We (Estelle Blaschke, Armin Linke, Thomas Weski, me) have worked over several months on the selection of photographs for the actual exhibition. Additionally, we invited anyone involved in the project or who was interested in the archive to make a personal selection. A collective method makes decisions anything else than easier, but it takes up relentlessly the problems of representative democracy. It made clear that a non-hierarchical selection process increases the enactment of differences. In practice, it was articulated through a small amount of images on which everyone was able to agree and a wide marginal spectrum in which each of us could argue for his/her selection. A certain unified voice remained but frayed at the same time.

The theorist Peggy Phelan argued, that representation is needed in order to be able to distinguish between the 'self' and the 'other.' I would like to see this differentiation as a proposal to remind us that the imaginary We inhabits cultural differences, conflicts and non-common grounds. If 'representation' dissolves in a totalitarian claim of the 'real,' we give up our means to distance ourselves from ourselves. In other words: representation should not be judged as a 'bad thing' per se and it should not be categorized under the umbrella of exchange value. Because if we moved representation away from the accumulative face of an

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economy of reproduction, then representation did not nourish the commodification of a live-event by any means; the public display does host a psycho-affective potency. Phelan's proposal allows us to problematize representation between an obvious western-democratic principle (in terms of *vertreten*, which is something like 'to act or to speak on behalf of') and the potential to insist on the right for a public voice, even in silence or from a marginal position or both (in terms of *darstellen*, which is something like 'to demonstrate' or 'to present oneself'). This approach hopes for an economy of a public exposure from a non-reproductive imperative. It enables us to consider, that the event's representation (in any kind of notation) can become a mode of production, which exceeds the actual event in favour for a transformative process ('virus'). In other words, the undocumented and unrecorded event may request a form of representation in order to initiate a movement in thinking, a transformation of desire, the mobilization of the unconscious and a proposal for a public / temporary declaration.

Considering space another key element in the definition and perception of an archive, how has its propriety changed (if it has changed) in a world that runs towards miniaturization?

I am not quite sure whether I understand this question properly, in particular what you mean by 'miniaturization'. Let me repeat the fact that the archive as such is impossible to exhibit, additionally also literally spoken: One would need quite some physical space to displace the archive's spatial dimension. In 'Double Bound Economies,' we faced 19.500 images to work with; it certainly would be a spatial challenge to get all of them into a space. Further examples are the Black Star archives which contain some 300.000 paper prints (see the essay by Hito Steyerl in frieze, issue 3, Winter 2011/12), or the Tito photo archive with ca. 600.000 photographs in Belgrade on which I am currently working with the artists Milića Tomic, Armin Linke, The Otolith Group and Fabian Bechtle, among others.

But I would not see this version of space as the key element in the definition of an archive. The question is not so much how to squeeze an archive into an exhibition space, but which methodologies are needed in order to articulate the archive's displacement and fragmentation?

The result is a hybrid.

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*Of Distances within the Archive's Nervous System.
An interview with Doreen Mende.*

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